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ABSTRACT

Contents of this booklet include: (1) "What's wrong with reading tests?", Deborah Meier, covering the following areas: the definition of reading, the social context of testing, the trouble with the tests, and how children handle tests; (2) "An English view of evaluation," an excerpt from a longer interview with Kenneth Barker at Froebel Institute in London, conducted a year ago as part of the Ford Foundation/School Council's Anglo-American Primary School Project; (3) "The game of language," Elli Ohringer, a paper concentrating on ways teachers can help children develop their skills and self-confidence in oral communication; and, (4) a book review by Celia Houghton of "Theresa, theater, terrariums," a pamphlet prepared by Jennifer Andreae documenting the New Rochelle School District's effort to implement the open classroom approach. (JM)

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Letter from the director

We are often asked about evaluation. Evaluation must be part of our process of change toward informal classrooms. We need to engage in serious and constant examination of what we do in order to ascertain not only *whether or not* but also *how* our work supports the continuity and extension of each child's learning.

Our thinking on general aspects of evaluation will be reported in future *Notes*. In this issue, an advisor to an Open Corridor Community criticizes the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) on other grounds than the familiar critique of class and culture bias. Schools are ranked for performance on the MAT, which tests the prescribed standard. School goals are then defined in terms of this standard and any wider definitions are blocked. The MAT is administered in the old whole-class format, and the pressure of its demands is so powerful that it may be said to dictate curriculum content. Additionally, since it is often used to make the decision to which class to assign a child, the test tends to reinforce ability tracking and grade retardation.

The informal context is different in every respect mentioned. But because we were committed to making a beginning, no matter how small, within the old structures (in the hope that the implications of our work would start a chain reaction for further and greater changes), we did not challenge the test in the early stages of our reorganization of classrooms. We treated the MAT as an incidental requirement. We did not organize the curriculum around it; we did not distort the whole pattern of the year and "teach to the test". We concentrated on creating an atmosphere of rich language stimulation and up till now our children, along with all children in New York City public schools, have taken the MAT. In back of our thinking was the feeling that we could do no worse than past records of test scores in traditional classrooms, and in fact, we have done no worse. We have in some instances done a little better.

Meanwhile, we became aware of the hardships the tests imposed on our children and indeed, on all children: its length, the whole-class manner in which it is given, the multiplicity and depersonalization of its questions and directions. We questioned further: What was the focus of the test: A child's skill in decoding the symbols of written language? A child's skill in decoding the tester's expectations? His skills in handling directions? His speed? His intelligence? The variety of possible answers to these questions blurred interpretation of test results.

We challenged the test's narrow consideration of discrete skills in reading, quite different from our understanding of the child's synthesis over a block of time. Test results might represent emergent acquisition, plateau or consolidation, but there is no built-in key to differentiation.

Our informal classrooms are now sufficiently established so that we can refocus on the damage to children that results from this test, especially as it is imposed on them at an age (7) when reading skills are shaky. At this point, while the test is being re-examined, we strongly recommend as an interim proposal two minimum changes: delay in giving the test until the child is 9 or the November of Grade 4, and administering it informally, to individuals or to small groups.

Deborah Meier's description points the way to needed changes within the MAT itself. Her indictment of the test should spur parents and teachers to challenge and protest its inconsistencies, its limited value for diagnosis and remediation, and its role in setting goals for education. Teachers can be trusted to know whether children are progressing in reading. Parents' confidence in their child's ability must not take on the coloration of test results.

The time has come for both teachers and parents to evaluate the MAT. *Lillian Weber*

What's wrong with reading tests?

Deborah Meier

Deborah Meier's critique of reading tests begins with what the majority of tests ignore -- that is, a definition of reading. Her well formulated viewpoint about reading, and learning to read, enable her to direct critical attention to major issues and thus not to get caught up (as the tests do themselves) in the bits and pieces of reading. It is this quality that makes her review much more than a complaint.

Edward A. Chittenden
Educational Testing Service

The reading test mystique is, despite the number and respectability of its opponents, decidedly more widespread and powerful than ever before. Faced with a growing demand for "accountability," school administrators increasingly tend to exploit testing as a cheap and easy way of defining goals as well as of measuring success.

As a result, every parent and citizen is alerted to and armed with very precise test statistics. A child is no longer "a good reader," "a poor reader," or even "a non-reader." Now Johnny is a 2.7 or a 4.1 reader. Schools, too, are consistently classified by reading test scores -- above grade level or below, and almost all "performance contracting" is based upon payment according to such test score results.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

It is not only the poor minority parent, with a history of legitimate suspicion about the good intentions of the school system, who is the "true believer" in the reading tests. It is not only 3R-conscious "middle America." The faith embraces also highly-educated parents, including many advocates of open classrooms, "relevant curriculum," and free schools. At meeting after meeting, many such parents -- while demanding the introduction of freer and more relevant schooling -- will inquire about the comparative test scores of open vs. formal schools and use past test scores to prove the evils of traditional education. Well-educated and well-off parents have told me how they "had to" change schools or hire tutors because their 9-year-old *scored* low, or anyway insufficiently high! ("But does he read well?" I ask in vain.) Others praise John Holt and A.S. Neil as their educational gods and then tell me proudly that they have just learned that their fifth grade son is an 11.3 reader. In short, almost all parents "believe in" these tests. They "believe in" them even when the scores defy their own observations about their own child's reading ability, and despite a nearly total ignorance of test contents, scoring methods, or, certainly, their own child's actual performance on the test.

Test scores are hard to resist, given their widespread use by school systems, their utilization in reputable studies on education, their quotation in the most scholarly journals, their yearly publicity in the *New York Times*, and the passing references made to them by the best intentioned educators when boasting of their own favorite programs. (Furthermore, the statistical exactitude of the testing lingo adds to an aura of scientific accuracy.) If this is the case with parents who know their own children, and school people who presumably know their own classrooms, it is certainly understandable that the public whose taxes support the schools should accept test scores as hard

data regarding the success or failure of school programs.

Yet an examination of the tests themselves, their scoring methods, and, most important, the manner in which children handle them, demonstrates that they do a grave disservice. They subject the young child to an evaluation system based on standards which neither child, parent, teacher, nor school may agree on or even be consciously aware of, and thus, often unwittingly, drive schools and teachers into adopting pressure-cooker programs to meet the needs of the tests, not children.

This combination of circumstances may account for what has become an open scandal in New York City schools: the widespread cheating done with regard to reading tests, not merely by students but by the educational establishment itself -- including traditionalists, reformers, and radicals.

While teachers and administrators congratulate themselves on the fresh wind of humanism that is blowing across the nation's schools (albeit amidst an inhumane poverty of funds), they have paid too little attention to the entrenchment of a system of measurement that could serve as the excuse for the death of any reforms.

"Why such passion? What are you afraid of? Aren't such tests "merely' a tool to measure a child's ability to read, which you also are eager to improve?" say well-intentioned colleagues. But what is reading? How do such tests measure it? And if they do not measure reading development, what is it they do? And how dangerous is their effect?

It is a cliche to note that education does not take place solely within the four walls of a school. In fact, *between* the ages of 6 and 16, children spend only about a fifth of their waking hours inside schools. But what is apparently less obvious is that it is therefore not possible to devise a standardized group test that measures only the data printed upon the mind by the school teacher.

Or, put another way, no standardized group test by its very nature can be without bias. Nor should it. It has to have a particular content of some sort. Furthermore, it has to have a style and a "jargon." It has to have a "format" -- a way of getting to what it is after. And finally, it must be built in such a way that it can be "objectively" scored for right and wrong responses.

THE TROUBLE WITH THE TESTS

Two major "biases" exist in the reading tests given to young children. One that has been well publicized is the class and cultural bias regarding choice of content. As testing critics have noted, tests reward not only "the ability to read" but also knowledge of particular words, ideas, places, and experiences, commonly linked more with one socioeconomic group than another.

While one can *understand* the argument that a high school diploma (or a college degree) should indicate knowledge of a certain "common curricula territory," it is not the tester of reading who should be deciding on the territory. Furthermore, to aim for this from the primary school is absurd. Worse, it is dangerous. For the task of the teacher of the young is the very opposite one. Early childhood education seeks to emphasize words, concepts, and reading material that will help a child sort out the here and now, that will provide continuity between his preschool learning and his school learning, between the different parts of his own life and environment. It stretches out beyond the world of intimacy only slowly, as experience, interests, and needs widen.

A test that ignores the nature of childhood separates -- with a tool of apparent scientific neutrality -- children of one kind of background from those of another. An examination of the way children deal with the test documents this fact in a startling

fashion. As one listens to bright, articulate black children from our inner city schools attempt to make sense of the bewildering array of test questions, the bias involved is painful and shocking.

The second bias, less apparent and probably more insidious because of its subtlety, is the extent to which standardized tests are rigged against the nature of the thinking of all young children. What appears to many teachers, in their effort to coach their students to success, as "immaturity" (if not stupidity) in dealing with test questions, is simply the normal developmental style of thought of any 7- or 8-year-old. Middle class children, because of their familiarity with certain key phrases and styles (conditioned responses), short-cut the process and succeed in producing "right" answers even though they do not carry out the logical thought implied by the question. They get it "right" for the "wrong" reason. The bright lower-class child, who cannot fall back upon a lifetime of familiarity with certain language, picture or word-association patterns, is dependent upon real mental ingenuity to make the necessary "logical" connections. As a result, even if he has equal reading skill and utilizes greater intelligence in his effort to think through the particular question on the test, he is bound to answer wrong more frequently. A 7-year-old child, still engaged in "pre-operational" thinking, or, at most, in what Jean Piaget has described as "early concrete operational thinking," is simply not in the same world as the adults who fashion such tests. It is for this reason that such a child's ingenuity and good judgment are not only useless to the task, but often even detrimental to it.

In labeling such children "slow," or seeking test-oriented get-rich-quick schemes, irreparable damage is done. Schemes to help such children "score better" (however well meant) invariably seek to substitute conditioned responses for good thinking. They block off the rich vein of associative thinking, imagery, spontaneity, and attendant self-confidence that the world makes sense upon which intellectual growth depends.

In relying on drilled associations to link specific terms or words, they divorce language from conceptual and experiential growth. They fashion their own curriculum demands which focus not on children's interests or their developmental needs but on preknowledge of the nature of the test contents. The tendency for "school thinking" to become disassociated from "sensible thinking" is thus reinforced. In short, in order to "look good" in second grade, we risk a child's potential for later growth.

To make matters worse, the scoring methods currently in vogue lead to their own absurdities. Test scores are reported by grade level norms: a second grader taking the test in April is "average" if he scores 2.7 (second year, seventh month). Towards the two ends of the scale the grade-level equivalents go wild. On one of the tests examined here, 77 out of 84 right scores 3.7, 4 more right jumps it to 5.2, and a mere 3 more catapults a student to 8.4. At the other end, average luck at guessing will place a second grader taking this test at 2.0. A few bad guesses and he zooms down to 1.3. For this reason, a poor reader is best advised to take the most advanced test he can, where, assuming he skips nothing and has average luck, he will score amazingly high in terms of grade level. The test makers admit the scoring system is misleading. They argue that it is hard to find one that will better satisfy the public.

HOW CHILDREN HANDLE TESTS

Following the spring 1971 testing period in New York City, I spent two weeks talking about the tests with second and third grade children with whom I had worked for some years in a central Harlem school. All had just completed one of two tests: Primary II or Elementary I of the Metropolitan Reading Achievement tests. These tests are fairly typical, and the following comments are not intended as criticism of this

particular set. For while in certain respects it has improvable qualities, this set is no worse than any others and better than some.

These tests are given to all second through fourth grade children (7- to 9-year-olds) in New York City each spring. I met with about 15 children in small group discussions and individual sessions, taping their comments so that I could review them later with other colleagues. Most of the children had had a limited period of skillful pre-test coaching, were among our best students academically, and had spent at least a year in fairly informal classrooms. These conversations led me to note at least four broad areas of competence that seemed to be involved in an ability to score high. Few of these competencies seemed necessarily connected, however, to "reading," "word knowledge," or "comprehension," the specific aims of the test.

The most startling realization was the extent of confusion in most children's minds about what they were being asked to think about or do. The test directions involved thinking skills that were inappropriate for most 7-year-olds; not only was there a poor choice of wording but also a mismatch between the test tasks and the minds of the children for whom the test was intended. For example, one part of the "word knowledge" subtest consists of simple line drawings followed by a choice of four words. The child is asked to select the one that "tells what the picture is about." Generally children had no difficulty thinking of a name for the object in question. But if that name did not work, the children were not always able to refocus in order to select the possible word association that the testmaker might have had in mind. A child in second grade looking at a drawing of a merry-go round sought vainly for the word "merry-go-round." "The only word that begins with an 'm' is 'mile,'" she wailed. "It couldn't be right, could it?" she inquired insecurely. A few chose "run," because the horses in the picture, they said, might be running. The correct answer, incidentally, was "turn." Similarly, a few good readers were stumped by the picture of a ball! They went over

and over the possible answers. Afterwards some insisted that there had been something wrong with their test! The "right answer," b-a-l-l, must certainly have been somewhere. They were unable to even consider "round" as a possible answer, although, as with "turn," most were quite able to read and use it appropriately.

Another section of the "word knowledge" subtest requires children to note the underlined word in an incomplete sentence, and then choose one of four words which "best completes the sentence." The sentences are of the type: "*Afraid* means..." "To *know* is to..." or "*Quiet* is the opposite of..." What the test seems to be seeking are synonyms and antonyms. But the children invented their own game of word association. A synonym is only one approach to "word definition" and involves a quite abstract notion about the replaceability of one word for another. If pressed for a "meaning," children (and adults) generally give a story example that describes the word or which uses it appropriately. When I asked what "afraid" means, children told me *when* or *why* you might be afraid, e.g., "Afraid means like when you go someplace new and you get afraid." They often selected the right answer, "scared," to complete this sentence because it was natural for them to use it in the context of "afraid." ("I get scared when I am afraid," seemed to make sense.) However, and for precisely the same reason, the children were divided more or less equally between right and wrong answers on the sentence "to *keep* means to..." The four choices included "carry" and "hold." The ones who got it right said, "If you want to keep *something* you got to *hold* onto it." The others, who answered it wrong, said with equal logic, "If you want to *keep* it you better *carry* it." In both cases the children were explaining the relationship in life between two words.

For some children of 7 and 8, "opposites" were difficult and were confused in their mind with the concept of "very different." When I tried to explain the notion of opposites, I began to grasp how complex and abstract

this "simple" idea was. Familiarity leads most children to the correct answers. But for some children, "tall" and "far" were opposites, just as clearly as "tall" and "short," and no reasoned argument in the world could demonstrate otherwise at this age. Their failure again was not due to an incapacity to read the right answer, but rather an inability to focus on the specific relationship involved. While this kind of data is of interest to a good teacher in assessing a child's mode of thinking and classifying, it tells us very little about his "word knowledge" and his ability to read. There might well be a statistical correlation between children who are "advanced" in such tasks and those who succeed in school and become good readers. However, if we are merely seeking a statistically predictive tool, one that will serve our purposes quite well already exists, one carefully documented in the Coleman Report, which proves that the best predictor of all is the income/educational background of a child's parents. Such statistical correlations are merely indicative of the degree to which schooling is too often made irrelevant -- not proof of the extent to which schooling is used effectively. Statistical *correlations* are not always sufficient evidence as to whether or not we are in fact measuring a relevant cognitive skill.

For our purposes, what is vital to know is whether a child answers a question incorrectly because he cannot read, because the vocabulary is unfamiliar or confusing to him, or merely because he has interpreted it in accord with his own common sense, in a manner appropriate to his age and his own experience. Even his "right" answers should be scrutinized with these same kinds of questions.

A similar confusion over the meaning of the test directions plagues many children in handling the "reading comprehension" subtest. Despite persistent efforts during the pretest coaching to help children understand the relationship between the story paragraph above and the incomplete sentence tasks below, some

children "refused" to grasp it. They stubbornly insisted upon inventing answers as though the previous paragraph did not exist, selecting answers instead based on their own personal experiences, intuition, or fantasies. They did so even when I reread the paragraph aloud to them, in order to get them to check their own answers. The very connection upon which the validity of this part of the test is based failed to make sense to them.

The language and subject matter are largely inappropriate for young children. For example, "a fair day is one that is..." The answer is "clear." But many children quite capable of reading the four choices offered had never had any reason to connect "fair" with weather. "Fair means," they explained to me, "when a teacher doesn't be unfair," "when you go on rides, that kind of fair." Similarly, few and far between were the children who were able to give me an example of where "point" and "place" were synonyms or went together in *any* way. Other words were often unfair in a test to be used with city children -- as inappropriate as landlord, subway, crosstown, apartment, junkie, or project (meaning a big apartment building) would be for rural youngsters or comfortable suburbanites. We are so unconsciously biased in the world of schools in favor of 19th Century America and suburban Westchester county, that we quite forget that some words have dropped out of urban usage. Nor can one see why a *reading* test for 7- and 8-year-olds should presume that any child's verbal, much less written, knowledge should include knowing that a "canoe" is a "kind of boat" rather than a "kind of ship," that "oats" are a "kind of grain," or that "clay" is a "kind of mud." And imagine the adult mentality that asks a 7-year-old child to select just one right answer to "A *giant* is..." "huge," "scary," "fierce" or "mean."

It is hardly worth belaboring the absurdity of testing reading by asking 8-year-olds to read and answer questions regarding Amazon ants, the discovery of penicillin in 1928 by an English scientist, Guy Fawkes Day and the Gunpowder Plot against the British government 350 years ago, or the contents and meaning of Egyptian religious art. It would be comparable to testing the average literate adult's reading ability by

giving him passages to read from Einstein, Piaget, or an advanced trigonometry text. Thus the test *makers* seek to impose a curriculum on the primary grades -- one that covers the terminology appropriate to a study of medical history, the geography of the world, and the history of Western civilization. To imagine such a curriculum actually being covered in an average school day is patently absurd; to attempt it would be educationally criminal. All good early childhood education begins with the language of the child, values his own life and experiences and emphasizes reading and writing as natural extensions of this verbal communication.

Even the narrowest skills of reading -- phonetic decoding ability and the possession of a good basic sight vocabulary -- are poorly measured. Every attempt is made to "trick" readers into betraying phonetic lapses and sight-word confusions. For example, among the four choices offered alongside a drawing of a human mouth are both "mouth" and "month." A majority of our good readers selected "month" because it came first. The u-n reversal is, we know, common up until fourth grade even among many fluent readers. Reading experts almost universally urge a casual approach to such reversals unless they are also associated with other reading problems. Yet the test had a number of such pitfalls which, to be avoided, would require a cautiousness toward reading (a word-for-word vocalization) that would indicate poor reading habits. *Month* and *mouth* and *log* and *leg*, for example, are hardly likely to be confused in a real reading situation.

Despite good sight word knowledge, strong decoding skill and a substantial verbal sophistication, some children still get into serious trouble over their interpretations of pictures or stories. For example, when shown a picture of a little boy at the beach with his hand on a girl's shoulder, almost everyone interviewed selected "push" as the best answer. While many did not understand the word "wade" (which was the "right" answer), they did not change their minds even when I explained what it meant. The word "push" seemed good enough and closer to their own experience with such a situation. Similarly, every second grader and all but one of the third graders misinterpreted a picture showing birds flying above and below some trees.

Those birds, they insisted, were "flying many ways." Only one boy chose the correct answer, "flying in a flock." While this indicates that many of these 7- and 8-year-olds were unfamiliar with the word "flock," it also means that most of them had an interpretation of the phrase "flying in many ways" that was different from the test maker's.

In another drawing, a boy is waving toward three boys talking together in the distance. Most children incorrectly and empathetically thought the boy by himself in the foreground was "lonely because he does not have any friends." While I found the children's answer sensible, I had spontaneously answered it "correctly" by selecting "John and some boys belong to a club." Apparently I had unconsciously responded to a small suburban-type clubhouse in the background, because afterward I had a hard time defending my answer to the children or to myself! In still another drawing, bright and imaginative Karen worked out a very skillful interpretation of a picture that stumped many children. The picture showed a man in the foreground painting a wall, and some other men in firemen's uniforms in the background carrying some small objects. "The man up front is painting," Karen explained proudly to our group. "But the answer isn't this one about painting, because how would we know he was a fireman! He hasn't a fireman hat on. So they must be talking about those men back there who are carrying things, especially see this man in the fireman's hat and that must be stuff for putting out fires." So she selected, "The fireman has the tools for putting out a fire." She convinced most of the children, including those who had correctly answered, "The fireman is doing some painting," and others who had said, "A fireman works by himself." Her mistake was not recognizing a fireman's uniform minus the hat and/or being too suspicious of the test. The children who were right generally had not bothered to read all the answers, but had simply noticed the word "painting" in the first answer given, and on that basis alone picked the right answer. Two children engaged in a charming verbal battle over a drawing of a lady shopping. "The man weighs the fruit before Mother buys it" just didn't seem right to one girl. "Where will Mother put the fruit he's weighing, since she's already carrying one bag that is too full?" "Well," said her classmate, "she could carry two bags." Her own mother

does that sometimes, and she demonstrated how it could be done. The first little girl remained dubious.

Another picture puzzled many children, who could not see the logical connection between any of the sentences and the picture. The right answer was dependent on first noticing the detail of rain streaks outside the window, connecting these streaks to the idea of a rainstorm, then linking a rainstorm to a power failure and finally, all of this to the candle on the table! In still another scene, we see a smiling well-dressed girl in raincoat and rain hat. Surely she was not going to let her books get wet, was the general consensus. She must have covered them, although it was hard to tell from the picture. Most children selected one of two wrong answers: "The rain will not hurt the books" or "Mary is taking good care of the books." I arrived at the right answer by following deviously deductive logic: if Mary had been conscientious and covered her books there would be two equally correct answers. This cannot happen on a standardized test. Therefore, "Mary's books will get wet in the rain" must be the preferred answer. Yet all three answers were equally easy to read and equally defensible as descriptions of the picture.

So convincing did I find the children's arguments in support of many of their wrong answers, that I often had to seek verification and counter-arguments from other adults. One might claim that some of their explanations were too labored, too imaginative, or relied on a very limited personal experience. But in only a few of the cases would greater reading skill, no matter how we defined it, have helped this group of children avoid their mistakes.

For all these reasons it should not be surprising that the second graders scored best on the last and most obtuse reading comprehension paragraph. The topic was sound vibrations and a technical description of how they are made. I "dishonestly" told the children not to bother to read it for "understanding." Instead, I suggested they start with the incomplete sentence tasks and go back then to find phrases that coincided with the possible answers. Almost every child, using this backward strategy, managed to get two out of four right, and many answered all four correctly. In the

easier paragraphs, in other words, they were penalized precisely for having sought to comprehend what was written. As a result, for example, some children thought Bill was "handsome," rather than "kind," to teach his brother to ride a bike. (Ugly was equated with meanness, and handsome with generosity.) Several insisted Mike must have had "wise parents" rather than "courage" to learn to ride a bike. And virtually all the children capable of reading the story about the architect thought his most important tools were his "paper and pencil" rather than his "ideas."

For most 7-year-olds, who have just begun the reading process reading is still a laborious word-for-word activity in which so much energy goes into decoding and recalling that precious little is left over for genuine comprehension of any sort. This situation is intensified when the subject and vocabulary are unfamiliar and require dealing with new ideas. For most children there are simply too many intellectual tasks to perform at one time, and the test is thus merely a huge miserable confidence-shattering experience. Yet they often did no worse, if we were able to hold them together long enough to answer every question, than those described here who have mastered the first stages of real reading and who were therefore in a position to bring their "living" intelligence into the test situation.

CONCLUSION

Schools can make a difference. But neither educational equality nor educational quality can be demonstrated or measured through standardized group tests for young children. The mistaken set of assumptions that underlie these tests are not merely absurd. They lead to disappointment, misplaced bitterness understandable paranoia, frantic parents, educators, and public rushing from one educational panacea to another, and finally, despair about the utility of school reform altogether.

Learning is a complex process and much remains to be understood about it. But an evaluation system must, at the very least, take into account what has been painstakingly learned from

years of careful research and observation about a child's mode of thinking, growing, and learning. To use a tool to measure a child's growth that ignores the personal, individual, and often idiosyncratic nature of a young child's language cannot help us evaluate either his language or his reading skill. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, it is essential that we demand that testing devices become the tool -- and not the shaper -- of our educational objectives.

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An English view of evaluation

The following is excerpted from a longer interview with Kenneth Barker at Froebel Institute in London conducted a year ago as part of the Ford Foundation/School Council's Anglo-American Primary School Project. Mr. Barker is currently deputy principal of Gypsy Hill College, which is part of the London University Institute of Education.

Once a child is tied to an assessment process, he is defined as having to achieve this or that at a given age, and then one can't consider anything else. But if one thinks of it as being more flexible than that, with greater license in terms of the critical period, then you can allow reading skills to develop from a much wider range of material. Just consider that alone.

Twenty years ago in primary schools you might well have had a whole school tied to a reading scheme. A child went from reading one book to another, the content of the book was quite unimportant. So long as one got to book 4 or 5 at a certain stage, this was fine, this was success. But compare that to children's interest in the Apollo 14 moon landing. The linguistic content of newspaper reports about this mission were quite within the scope of relatively young children. They could absorb and understand material which wouldn't bear any comparison to the formal reading scheme; the material was markedly in advance of it. Tied to the formal reading scheme, there's no opportunity to expand out into that sort of thing. This is one of the evils of a constant ongoing assessment procedure, especially if it is tied down. The tighter it is in fact the worse it becomes. That isn't to say that teachers in a progressive school are not evaluating what they're doing all the time; it doesn't mean that they lose any sense of aims and objectives.

In fact it is the person who teaches according to a prescribed curriculum who doesn't need to think about aims and objectives or ultimate directions and development, nor does he need to think too much about whether what he is doing is appropriate for the children in front of him. There's a regular joke about the English colonel in this country. When we used to live in the days of the Empire, we rather expected that all the world would speak English and if they didn't, all one had to do was to shout rather louder and they would ultimately understand. Well, there is something about the old formal approach to education that is a bit like this. If one has got to teach quadratic equations to a class of 13-year-olds, and they don't get it the first time, give it to them a second time, and if they still don't get it, give it to them a third time, perhaps more heavily punctuated, and perhaps with the threat of canes and detentions if they don't succeed in what *they* are trying to do. The person working informally in the schools can never operate this sort of system with any justification. He's constantly got to be aware of the developmental level of the individual child with whom he's dealing and decide whether the concepts involved are appropriate to that level. An informal teacher has got to know whether the individual has had the necessary previous experience to do the work expected of him. These are implied obligations on the part of anybody who undertakes to work with children in a democratic informal manner.

You can't lose your sense of purpose, you can't lose sight of your aims or objectives, and you constantly have to evaluate as you go along to try to tie up the provision you're making in the classroom to the general stage of the individual's growth.

The game of language

Elli Ohringer

Step into an open classroom and listen! Children are using language, expressing thoughts and feelings, communicating ideas. They are using language to supplement behavior -- to control, to refine, to elaborate, to confirm. In our Open Corridor classrooms we have many children who are highly skilled in language ability, and we have a responsibility to these children to help them refine these skills and strengthen the basic cognitive processes in language. We have at the same time an obligation to the large numbers of children in our classrooms who have very limited ability in language and limited confidence in their language skills. Sometimes, however, we underestimate the ability of many of these children because we have created few opportunities for them to use the language they know and have not taken time to listen. Obviously, listening must precede intelligent extension from the point of a child's use. In this paper I concentrate on ways teachers can help children develop their skills and self-confidence in oral communication. The focus is on spoken language.

The first prerequisite for oral communication is an attitude of interest on the part of the teacher in the life a child brings to the classroom -- his family, his siblings, his home, his neighborhood. This is the richest source of stimulation, and it must then be matched by a classroom environment that is full of points of recognition as well as of stimulation for a child. As we examine the kinds of language experiences we would like to see in classrooms, let us think in terms of four categories of oral communication. The first, *descriptive language*, stems from opportunities children are given to verbalize their observations and experiences. The

second, *process language*, emerges as children recapitulate their work efforts or the sequential steps in an activity or a concrete experience. The third is *interactive language*, which comes out of the deliberately staged problems or tasks that inherently demand communication through language. And the fourth, *theme language*, grows out of organization around a particular theme, as in dramatization or plans for a trip.

Sometimes it is obvious that a particular activity is designed to encourage *process language* (for example, a discussion of the steps in making vegetable soup) or calls for *descriptive language* (such as a comparison of the Corridor's rabbits, guinea pigs and turtles). Often the categories merge as language serves many functions.

Let's look first at some problems which teachers can set for children -- the intentionally staged problems which call upon children's resources in oral language and provide opportunities for enrichment of these resources, extension of skills, and delight in the process of communication.

Take ten pictures, numbering them from 1 - 10 on the back. Children pick numbers out of a box that correspond to those on the pictures. They look at the picture and tape-record their own description of that picture. The tape is played at a later time; others in the group must decide which picture matches which description. If no tape recorder is available, this activity can be done while sitting around a table with the pictures spread out. Try it with rather ambiguous pictures (*New Yorker* covers are excellent) or perhaps with several pictures that contain some similar elements.

A group or a single child is asked to tape-record sounds in the environment -- indoors or outdoors. When the tape is played to the group, the others must identify the sounds. A variation: The group must tell what the sounds make them *think* of, i.e., associations that arise from the sounds. Again, the lack of a tape recorder need not stand in the way; sounds can be made behind a screen. Capturing the language that comes from the children as they associate to the sounds may result in poetry. For younger children, the teacher may

want to tape the sounds, beginning perhaps with classmate's voices to be identified. For older children, she may put a selection of words out on the table as the group sits around listening to the sounds. Which words fit the sounds? Does everyone agree?

. Cut out a series of magazine pictures. Put them in a box. The first child selects a picture and must begin a story using this picture as the take-off point. The next child chooses a picture and continues the story, fitting in the characters and setting of his picture. The rest carry it on. The stories can be written down or taped. Another group using the same pictures may concoct a different tale. Comparing stories will be fun! Story maps, a series of unrelated pictures, arranged comic strip style, can be a similar starting point. For older children one can mix in phrases ("slept late," "went to jail," "itchy back," etc.) with the pictures or do it with phrases alone.

. Two children are separated by a screen or easel. One makes a design or picture and, as he does, tries to get the other to reproduce it on his side. He must "talk" the other into duplicating his picture. Communication by means of process language and descriptive language is necessary!

. Cut out popular advertisements from magazines, carefully omitting words. Children must recognize the product being advertised. Can they tell what gave them the clue? What other product could it be advertising?

Let's return now to the classroom environment and some simple, easy to obtain items that should be part of every classroom -- things which the children recognize and through which they can recall previous out-of-school experiences as well as new things which stimulate oral language. Let's remember, too, that the best conversation starters are often free!

Dress-up box with a mirror attached:
A natural stimulant of theme language. What's inside? Perhaps a sheriff's badge, a silver-foil crown, a square of red satin, a pair of glass-less glasses.

. Touch box:
  Gaily covered with scraps of wallpaper, containing bits of touchable things: a sponge, a piece of corduroy, a popsicle stick, a ball of clay, a feather. Children reach in and describe what they feel.

. Pets and growing things:
  Flora and fauna, from avocado pits to gerbil families.

. Beautiful things:
  A vase of flowers, a piece of purple velvet, a shell.

. Pictures:
  With a stimulating question underneath: "Why is this boy mad?" "What is she dreaming about?"

. Literature:
  Poetry, fairy tales, adventure and fantasy, street rhymes and jingles.

. Machines:
  How things work -- a fascinating topic of conversation.

. Food:
  The aroma of real soup cooking, the smoothness of freshly-shaken butter, the pop-pop of cranberries bursting...so much to talk about.

. Natural materials:
  Children create and communicate with sand, water, clay, wood, paint, and junk.

. Going places:
  Perhaps no further than the school furnace room, the park, the neighborhood bakery.

There are, then, many ways we can help children grow in language ability: by planning activities that require oral communication and by planning the environment around language-rich materials and experiences. Let's try some of the suggested activities, let's invent new ones -- and then, let's listen!

A teacher who listens might even discover rich, unexpected resources in the children. The story of *Cookie* is an example.

A few children were gathered around a rabbit cage. They were a usual group of children for a central Harlem school. Some black, some Puerto Rican, some verbal, some not so verbal A teacher came up alongside the group, joined them, and simply recorded what the children said. Until they heard it read back to them, and saw it lovingly, carefully, written down, these children didn't know they could talk poetry.

COOKIE

Cookie feels fine
He likes paper
He could drink
He's a mother rabbit

She gonna have a baby
If she a mother
She gonna have a baby?

I'm gonna put you 'way Cookie
Cookie
Don' be scared
There --
Wanna carrot?
Wanna carrot?
He don' got no water
Jus a little bit.
You pretty Cookie
You need some water
You drink a lot.

Cookie my man !!
You better not put nothin by here
Cause Cookie will eat it up !!

This rabbit, he gonna bite me
This rabbit, he gonna sleep
Cause he close his eyes
That means he gonna sleep.

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Book review: Theresa, theater terrariums

Celia Houghton

Open Education, ESEA Title 1
Theresa, theater, terrariums.
New York State Education Department

This pamphlet, as its introduction states, documents the New Rochelle School District's effort to implement the open classroom approach, and as such it "is an account of the inevitable confusions, problems, frustrations, feelings and satisfactions on the part of teachers, parent, children and the British consultant. It makes the point that:

> "Just as children progress through stages in their growth and development toward adulthood, so it would seem that school districts, administrators, teachers, parents, children, and consultants must also progress through certain stages as they move toward implementing an open classroom."

Clearly, the pamphlet is all that it claims to be and more, and Jennifer Andreae, who prepared the pamphlet, is to be congratulated. People who can engineer encounters that lead to effective learning require particular skills and abilities. Mrs. Andreae's sensitivity in helping teachers develop these skills and abilities, her willingness to take a teacher at any point of development and lead him gently and unhurriedly forward, is a lesson to all of us who work as consultants and advisors in open education.

Theresa, theater, terrariums will be very helpful to teachers, particularly to those teachers beginning to work in open education programs. The New Rochelle teachers' accounts of making changes offer encouragement and practical help; they freely speak of their frustrations and at times despair. To the beginning teacher it is helpful to know that others have trodden the same path, that problems do get solved, with time and patience, and that there are satisfactions along the way.

A teacher must have knowledge of how children grow and learn, how they shape their own behavior, how they feel. He must know, too, that real responsibility must be delegated to children because they can become responsible only in this way. Mrs. Andreae says, "As with all skill development, particularly the skills of making responsible decisions, self-discipline and taking responsibility, a child needs constant practice and encouragement throughout the formative years." This pamphlet gives teachers practical help in all these things and in overcoming organizational problems; the section on the Corridor is particularly helpful, I feel.

The account of the parents' relationship to the open classroom is very interesting also. "Needless to add," the pamphlet ends, "the most necessary requirement for change and continued growth is to have the courage of one's convictions." That Mrs. Andreae and the New Rochelle teachers and parents who contributed to the pamphlet have the courage of their convictions is clear, and we may all benefit from it.

About the advisory service to open corridors

The City College Advisory Service to Open Corridors (in New York City public schools) grew out of the first Open Corridor Project sponsored by City College in 1967. CCNY supported the project out of its interest in developing improved and more relevant practice teaching situations in the schools, which would in turn draw theory and practice into closer relationship. The "situations" developed, called open corridor communities, introduced a change in structure into New York City public schools which made possible transition to informal education. Informal education, as Lillian Weber has written:

> "refers to the setting, the arrangements, the teacher-child and child-child relationships that maintain, restimulate if necessary, and extend what is considered to be the most intense form of learning, the already existing child's way of learning through play and through the experiences he seeks out for himself."*

The first Open Corridor project joined five classrooms in a public school in Harlem. During that year, teachers and parents in other schools visited this school and, inspired by this example of possibility, tried to reorganize groups of their own classrooms. By September 1969, two years later, with the support of principals, the first five classrooms had become 37 classrooms in five schools. Now it is 90 classrooms in 12 schools.

*Weber, Lillian, *The English Infant School and Informal Education*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Engelwood Cliffs, N.J., 1971.

As the project expanded and demands from teachers became more pressing, Mrs. Weber undertook, with Ford Foundation funding and funding and support from local school districts, the training of a group of advisors who could work with her and with teachers in the schools in developing and implementing informal ideas and practice. Thus was created the City College Advisory Service to Open Corridors. Through this service Mrs. Weber has trained new advisors and developed new situations in the public schools. These new advisors in turn train apprentice-advisors and themselves develop new open corridor communities. All advisors participate in regular training sessions and seminars at City College in child development and curriculum led by Mrs. Weber and such consultants as Jean Johnson of the Froebel Institute in London, Dr. Vera John of Yeshiva University, and Dr. Edward Chittenden of Educational Testing Service.

The advisors are all engaged in reorganizing parts of large schools, helping make them into communities where relationships are supportive, where the role of the school has been redefined as the obligation to support and implement the natural development of a child. Consequently the advisors' efforts center on institutional change, rather than on making one classroom a shining example of informal education or on making several separate classrooms ideal places for children to grow and learn. Their efforts center on creating humanized cooperating communities of adults and children within the large dehumanized schools that have become standard in New York City.

These communities strive to be total environments in which children in heterogeneously grouped classes of differing age-grade levels can build and rebuild, in their own active, uneven, and individual ways, the web of their emotional, social, and intellectual understandings. A child's own experiences with other children, with adults, and with the experience provided in the environment, influence the course of the synthesizing of his understandings. The open corridor communities try to support this interrelated continuous character of a child's development. The environment they provide represents a break with the traditional self-contained, teacher-controlled classroom and its whole-class orientation.

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